

Assessing Hometown Security In Rhode Island's Second District

Prepared by

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As a member of the newly-created Select Committee on Homeland Security, Congressman Jim Langevin has been eager to learn more about how communities are faring in the post-September 11th environment and what they need from the federal government to be prepared for future emergencies, be they terrorist attacks or natural disasters. Because homeland security begins with our hometowns, Langevin's first priority was to hear directly from towns in his district about this critical issue. To gather this information, Congressman Langevin conducted a survey of a broad range of first responders and other homeland security stakeholders in his congressional district to elicit the "hometown security" needs and experiences of the communities he represents. Following is a list of the key findings from the study:

- Police personnel, fire personnel and communications technology rank at the top of respondents' priorities and concerns
- Tight state and local budgets are preventing many communities from spending necessary amounts on homeland security, leaving them eager for federal assistance
- Even communities with sufficient resources during normal periods find their budgets severely taxed during times of heightened threat alert
- Lack of funding for overtime is a big concern and a barrier to pursuing training and other activities
- No matter how much money communities have themselves, or have received from the federal government, more is always needed – only 4% of respondents reported having enough money for homeland security
- Firefighter respondents are adamant that the FIRE Grant program not be cut back or folded into other homeland security grant programs
- Major vulnerabilities in Rhode Island include: I-95 running through towns; unprotected reservoirs and other water supplies; lack of adequate training; and insufficient communications equipment
- A majority of respondents do not think the federal government is doing all it can to help, and two-thirds have never been contacted by the Department of Homeland Security or received information about keeping their communities safe
- Large cities and hospitals need help preparing for potential Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) events

In response to these findings, Congressman Langevin has:

- Helped draft the Preparing America to Respond Effectively (PREPARE) Act, a package of initiatives designed to more effectively meet the needs of first responders
- Written to Homeland Security Secretary Ridge, citing the results of this survey and seeking assistance in several areas, including information-sharing, communications technology and training
- Co-sponsored legislation to reimburse state and local governments when heightened threat alerts result in increased expenditures for personnel and equipment
- Co-sponsored a bill to double first responder grant funding and speed up disbursement of funds
- Urged Secretary Ridge to maintain the integrity of the FIRE grant program within DHS
- Sought full funding for the COPS Program, following the President's proposal to eliminate COPS
- Co-sponsored legislation to require implementation of Weapons of Mass Destruction Civil Support Teams in states that currently lack them, including Rhode Island

II. INTRODUCTION

In February 2003, Congressman Jim Langevin was asked by House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi to serve on the newly-established House Select Committee on Homeland Security. The Committee is charged with overseeing the creation and work of the Department of Homeland Security and ensuring that America is prepared to thwart and, if necessary, respond to future acts of terrorism or natural disasters on our soil.

Congressman Langevin has sought to systematically assess the needs of Rhode Island's communities in order to ensure his work on the Select Committee serves the best interests of his constituents. The survey he conducted was designed to solicit input from a wide variety of first responders and elected officials and strengthen partnerships with these homeland security experts that will serve Rhode Islanders in the coming months and years.

This report presents the results of the study administered by Congressman Langevin. While not scientific, it reveals first responders' and elected officials' opinions about the state of preparedness in their communities. The findings will guide Congressman Langevin's legislative priorities and his work on the Select Committee on Homeland Security.

III. FINDINGS

A. Priorities

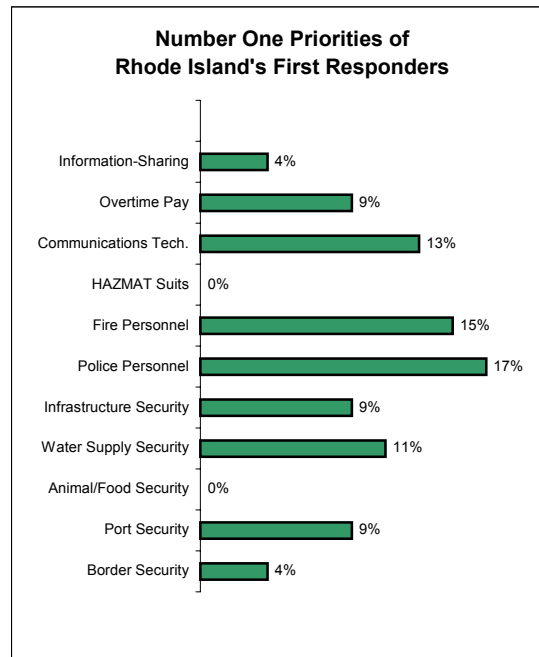
First responders and elected officials were asked to rate eleven homeland security funding priorities in order from one to eleven. They include:

- | | |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| ✓ Border Security | ✓ HAZMAT Suits |
| ✓ Port Security | ✓ Overtime Pay |
| ✓ Animal/Food Supply Security | ✓ Communications Technology |
| ✓ Water Supply Security | ✓ Fire Personnel |
| ✓ Infrastructure Security | ✓ Police Personnel |
| ✓ Information-Sharing | |

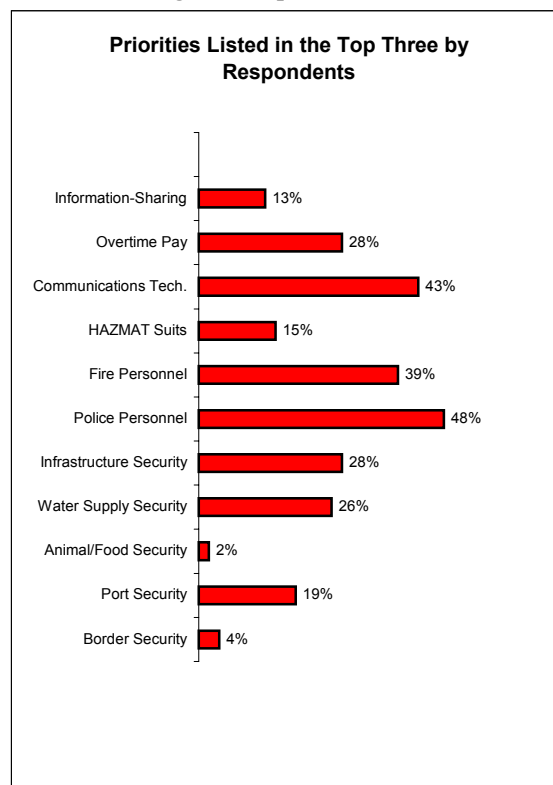
Three priorities – police personnel, fire personnel, and communications technology - stand out as the most important needs for respondents. Other issues frequently cited include information-sharing, overtime pay, and water and infrastructure security.

The most common selections for top priority were police and fire personnel, which garnered 17 percent and 15 percent of number-one choices, respectively.

Communications technology was the third most popular choice, followed by water supply security.

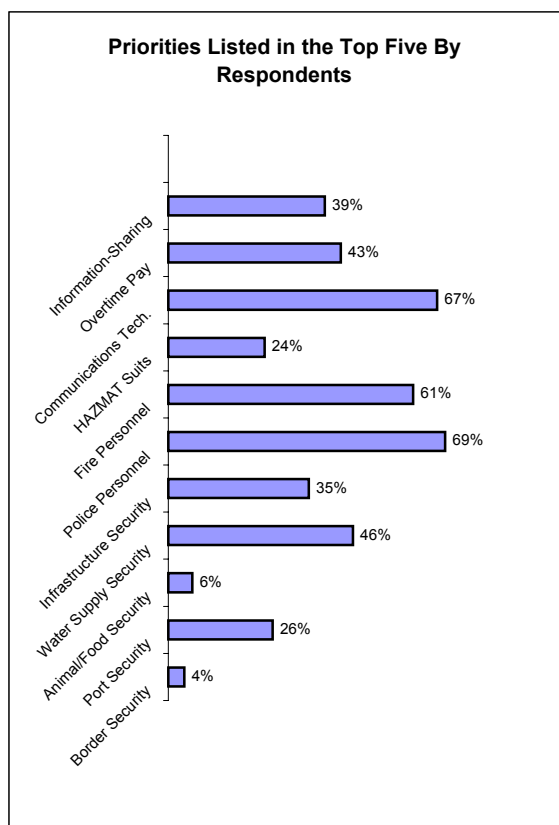


Expanding the analysis to include respondents' top three priorities reveals a similar pattern. Nearly half of first responders ranked police personnel as their first, second or third choice; 43 percent chose communications technology; and 39 percent selected fire personnel. Over 20 percent also ranked infrastructure security, water supply security or overtime among their top three choices.



Further expanding the analysis to review respondents' top five concerns demonstrates that police personnel, communications technology and fire personnel remain the highest-ranked priorities. Water supply security and overtime pay continue to round out the five greatest concerns, with over one-third of respondents also placing information-sharing and infrastructure security among their top five.

Animal and food security and border security consistently ranked at the bottom of the priority list, likely due to Rhode Island's geographic location and lack of significant agriculture industry.



B. Local Concerns

Survey participants were asked to expand on their local experiences with homeland security funding. Their input was sought on the subject of budget cutbacks, specifically whether fiscal concerns had either forced cuts in homeland security personnel and efforts, or had required cuts to other local programs in order to devote sufficient resources to homeland security.

Responses in this section were open-ended, and many respondents expressed concerns about budget restrictions. In particular, participants cited overtime funding as a key concern and stated that training and

other preparedness and response activities were difficult to accomplish without the ability to compensate personnel for overtime hours required.

Several officials said their communities had not yet been forced to cut back on homeland security or other programs. However, one police chief stated: "Our town, as is the case with other communities, does not have the luxury... to direct funds for homeland security purposes. Taking funds from other areas of a budget becomes necessary to accomplish these tasks."

Several respondents cited the pressure that growing school districts have placed on property tax rates and the ability to fund other programs.

Another respondent said, "Budget restrictions resulted in the police department not being able to purchase replacement cruisers or newer equipment this year... The money needed to train and equip officers based on security threats after 9/11/2001 is not going to be available on the local levels and will have to be provided with assistance from DHS."

A local fire chief responded that "high taxes and a distressed economy prevent us from having the necessary staffing," and a police chief offered this sobering assessment: "Risk evaluations, special training, equipment needs and overtime for port and shoreline security have caused us to take our focus away from other more traditional response. This is a concern because of limited resources but also because we worry [whether] we are giving enough attention to both important issues."

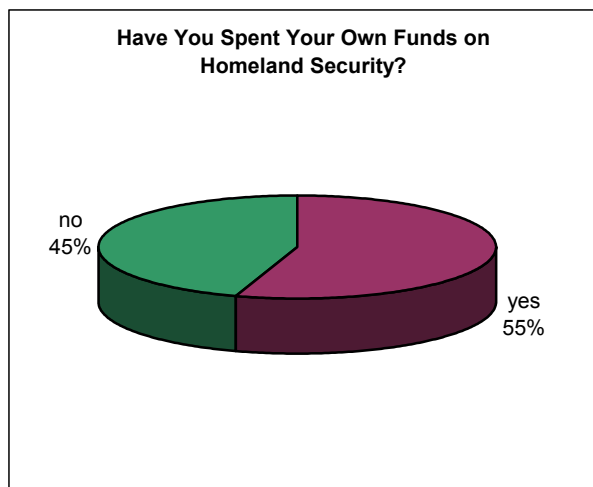
At least one participant said that his town had no budget for homeland security whatsoever, and another town's emergency management director commented, "We have not been able to spend any additional funds on homeland security because of severe budget deficits... We desperately need assistance from the federal government in these areas."

Several surveys indicated that, while funding is adequate at present, any increase in the federal threat level would necessitate expenditures like overtime pay that the community could not bear without federal assistance.

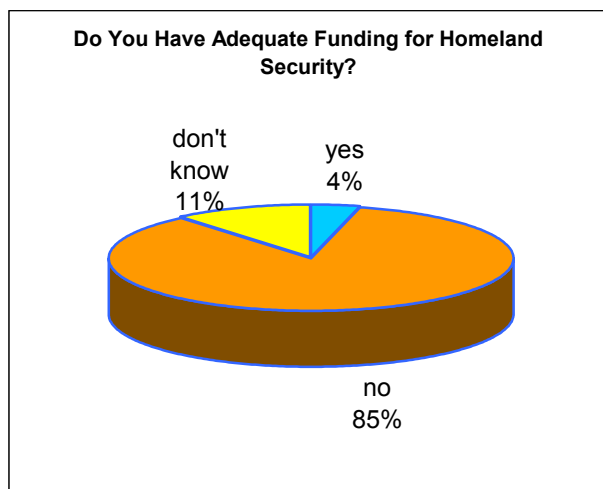
C. Adequate Funding

The survey posed several yes-or-no questions regarding homeland security funding in respondents' communities. When asked whether they had had to

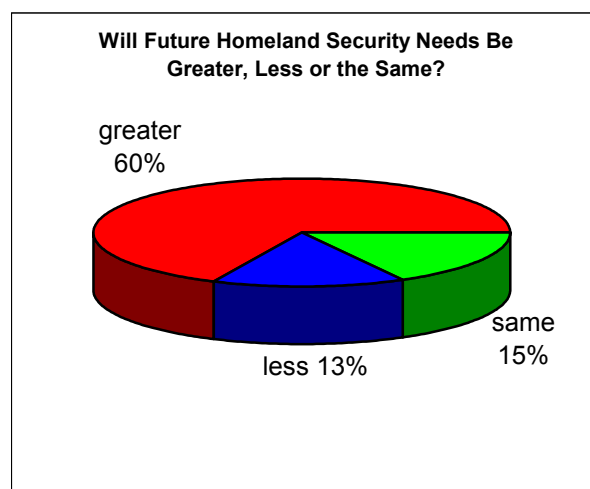
spend their own funds on homeland security, more than half of respondents answered in the affirmative.



Asked whether they feel they have adequate funds for homeland security needs, an overwhelming 85 percent of survey participants answered that they did not. Only 4 percent said yes.



Finally, the survey asked respondents whether they believed homeland security needs would be greater than, less than, or the same in the future. Sixty percent answered that they would be greater. This figure is especially noteworthy in light of the fact that the vast majority of respondents already feel they lack sufficient funding to meet current needs.



Survey respondents were also asked to respond to Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge's statement that "enormous sums" of federal homeland security funding have been budgeted by the Administration, and that "adequate funding" would be available.

In addition, respondents were asked to relate their own homeland security successes and their experiences with federal funding and coordination with the Department of Homeland Security. Again, these responses were open-ended.

Some respondents answered that there had been no homeland security "successes" to report, and many took issue with Secretary Ridge's assessment that "adequate resources" have been made available. However, several indicated that they had received or expected to receive much-needed federal funding for equipment, had participated in worthwhile training activities, and had worked on regional initiatives that maximized assets without overtaxing any particular town or agency.

Nonetheless, the consensus appeared to be that regardless of what they have already received, more funding is needed. As one police chief put it, "We have received one grant ... at this time. 'Adequate resources' or 'enormous sums' make good front page headlines, but we need to fund the basics so that the security of our communities can be accomplished by the local authorities." Another police chief said, "The 'enormous sums' must be going to other law enforcement agencies."

Some expressed concern over limitations on the use of federal funds. In particular, "approved equipment lists" seem to prevent local officials from spending scarce resources on the most pressing needs.

Another concern raised by respondents was the troubling likelihood that in order to provide sufficient homeland security funds, other federal accounts would have to be cut or eliminated. One fire chief warned that “some of [the increased funding] comes from other existing programs, which means that communities must move funds to cover the losses. The FIRE Act is an example of one which the President wishes to move into the homeland defense department... This means basic fire safety is now being ignored.”

Several respondents specifically mentioned the FIRE Act, an extremely popular federal program, which distributes funds directly to local fire departments for basic training, equipment and other needs. Another fire chief said, “It is extremely important to keep this program intact and administered as it is now.”

D. Vulnerabilities

Respondents were asked whether they had reviewed vulnerabilities in their communities, and whether they felt the Department of Homeland Security understood specific vulnerabilities in their area. The survey also asked participants to elaborate on any specific vulnerabilities they had identified.

Responses were fairly evenly split on the question of whether DHS understood area vulnerabilities: 46 percent responded yes, and 44 percent answered no. A full 85 percent of respondents reported that they had reviewed vulnerabilities to terrorist attacks.

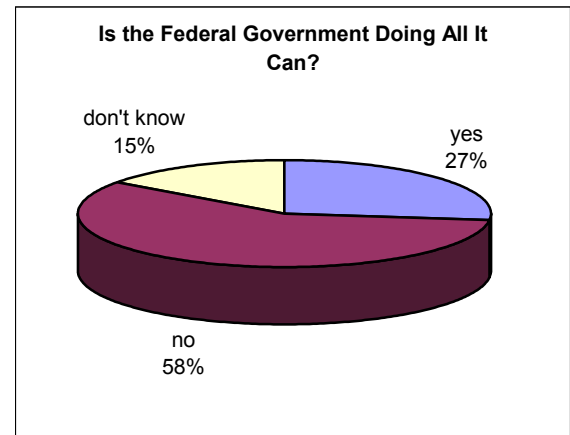
The following vulnerabilities were specifically mentioned by more than one respondent:

- Reservoirs and other water supplies not secure
- I-95 running through/near towns
- Lack of adequate training
- School buildings unprotected
- Technology susceptible to cyber-attack
- Several power plants
- Inadequate training, equipment or hospital capacity to cope with WMD attacks
- Very little security at commercial buildings
- Insufficient communications equipment

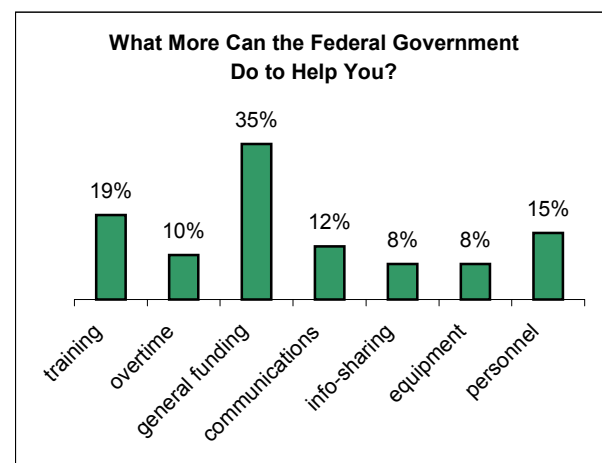
E. Assistance from the Federal Government

This section posed several questions regarding the federal government’s role in local and state homeland security efforts.

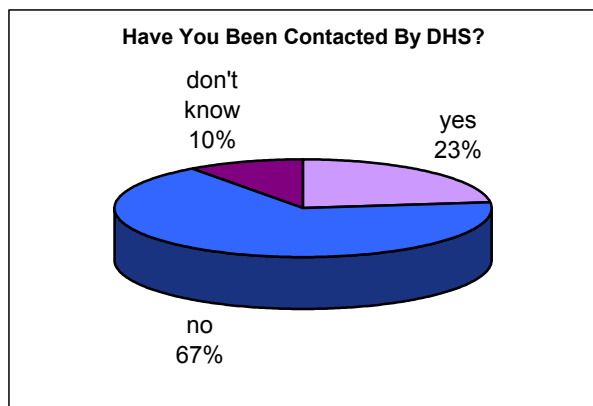
When asked “Is the federal government doing all it can?” the majority of respondents said no. However, several people qualified their answers by acknowledging that the government seemed to be doing as well as possible given fiscal constraints, the short time DHS has been operational and other factors.



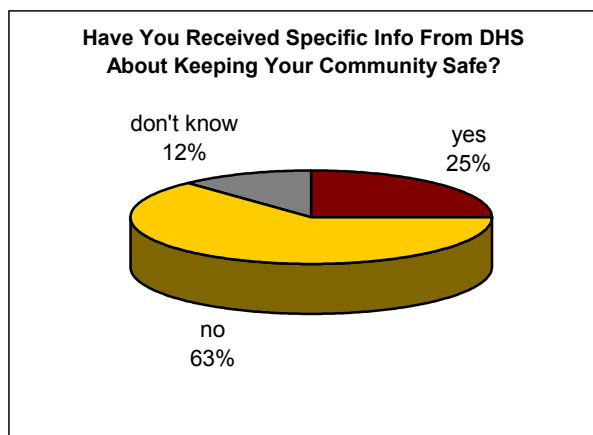
As a follow-up question, respondents were asked what more the federal government could do to help them secure their communities. The most prevalent response was funding in general, followed by training and personnel. Other areas where respondents thought the federal government should be doing more include communications, training, equipment and information-sharing. The following chart shows the frequency with which the most common responses appeared.



When asked whether they had ever been contacted by the Department of Homeland Security, two-thirds of participants responded that they had not.



Nearly two-thirds of respondents also said that they had not received any specific information from the Department about how best to protect their community.



Over half (54 percent) of respondents said that communication and coordination with the federal government are not adequate, while 15 percent said they were sufficient, and 31 percent didn't know or didn't respond.

Finally, 38 percent of survey participants said that they did not have enough flexibility to spend federal homeland security funds in the best possible manner for local needs. One-quarter (25 percent) thought flexibility was adequate, and 37 percent did not have enough information or did not answer.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

While communities in Rhode Island's Second Congressional District appear to be taking homeland security efforts seriously and doing their best with the resources available, it is clear from this survey that they want and need more assistance and information from the federal government. There is very little evidence of any sort of meaningful partnership between the Department of Homeland Security and local first responders.

The most basic concern is funding. With the state and many local governments experiencing tight budgets and making difficult decisions about which programs to fund, most communities will not reach an adequate level of preparedness without federal help.

It is also apparent, however, that local officials do not want additional mandates on how that money may be spent, preferring instead to allocate resources based on the unique needs of their particular departments and communities.

Funding is critically needed for overtime pay for personnel involved in training and other activities beyond their daily public safety responsibilities. In addition, communications equipment must be upgraded and made interoperable with other communities, and very few, if any, towns seem able to afford this type of expense.

Local responders are also looking to the federal government for guidance on procurement and best practices, as well as pertinent and specific threat information, and by and large they are not receiving it.

A concern also exists that in the rush to allocate federal dollars for homeland security, critical programs that fund everyday local preparedness and response functions, such as FIRE and COPS Grants, will be shortchanged. Local officials highlighted the importance of keeping these programs fully funded and separate, rather than combining them with homeland security programs or, worse, defunding them and allocating the money as "new" homeland security funding.

Finally, even those communities which have been able thus far to devote the necessary funds to homeland security, or which have minimal emergency preparedness needs, caution that without additional federal help, they will not be able to cope with heightened expenditures and responsibilities under heightened threat alerts.

V. LEGISLATIVE REMEDIES

Congressman Langevin has taken several steps to address the needs and concerns highlighted by his constituents through this survey.

Langevin has helped Jim Turner, Ranking Member of the Select Committee on Homeland Security, draft a package of legislative initiatives designed to meet the needs of first responders. The Preparing America to Respond Effectively (PREPARE) Act:

- Creates a Task Force on Standards for Terrorism Preparedness to develop a methodology for local and state governments to use to determine what resources are needed to be prepared for a terrorist attack
- Creates PREPARE Grants to provide every jurisdiction what it needs to be prepared, meeting the highest priorities first
- Requires DHS to reform the threat advisory system so it can issue alerts specific to geographic area and industry sector, and requires the agency to provide threat information and recommend actions at the state and local level
- Clarifies the responsibilities of DHS and other federal agencies for sharing information with, and receiving information from, state and local governments
- Provides support for expedited security clearances and access to equipment for receiving classified intelligence at the state and local levels
- Requires the development of first responder training and equipment standards, and mandates that equipment be interoperable
- Provides first responders with additional radio spectrum, and authorizes \$20 million to give every state and major metropolitan area the immediate capability to connect radios of different responder agencies

Congressman Langevin has also co-sponsored legislation to double first-responder grant funding, by increasing fiscal year 2003 funding to over \$7 billion and providing \$10.6 billion for fiscal year 2004. The bill also seeks to expedite disbursement of the funds by requiring DHS to award 60 percent of appropriated funds within 120 days. Finally, the measure waives the 25 percent matching requirement in the President's budget in most cases.

Furthermore, Langevin has written to Department of Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge to inform the

Secretary of the results of his survey. Langevin asked Secretary Ridge for assistance with the needs described by his constituents, including information-sharing, communications technology, training and overtime.

To respond to the concern that communities may not be able to afford the additional expenditures necessary under heightened threat alerts, Langevin has co-sponsored the State Threat Alert Reimbursement (STAR) Act. When the national threat advisory level is increased to Orange or above, the STAR Act would allow governors to apply, on behalf of state and local agencies, for reimbursement for costs associated with personnel wages, including overtime, deployment of equipment, direct equipment losses, closing public and government facilities, and other expenses. State and local government should not have to, and clearly are not always able to, cover these costs themselves.

Langevin has also urged Secretary Ridge to maintain the integrity of the successful FIRE grant program within the new organization of DHS. Specifically, his letter requests that the program be kept separate and distinct from the First Responders Grant Program and also kept within the jurisdiction of FEMA.

In a letter to House appropriators earlier this year, Congressman Langevin requested full funding (at least \$330 million) for the hiring component of the COPS Program in fiscal year 2004. The President's budget proposal would eliminate funding for COPS hiring initiatives and reduce support for COPS programs that help communities afford crime-fighting technologies.

Finally, in response to concerns in Providence and elsewhere about readiness for possible Weapons of Mass Destruction incidents, Langevin has co-sponsored legislation to require implementation of Weapons of Mass Destruction Civil Support Teams in states that currently lack them, including Rhode Island. These National Guard teams provide a well-trained assessment team to support state efforts in a WMD situation, but currently only 32 states have Civil Support Teams funded by the Department of Defense.

It is Congressman Langevin's hope that these measures will begin to meaningfully address the significant concerns raised by first responders and elected officials in his district. In addition, he will rely on the survey responses he received to inform his work in Congress, and particularly on the Select Committee on Homeland Security, to ensure all of America's hometowns have the resources and support they need to protect their citizens from threats and emergencies of any kind.

APPENDIX: METHODOLOGY

To learn as much as possible about the homeland security needs of Rhode Island's communities, Congressman Langevin surveyed the people who deal with these issues on a daily basis. Surveys were sent to a wide range of first responders and elected officials in Rhode Island's Second District. Recipients of the surveys included: police chiefs, fire chiefs, mayors, town managers, city/town council members, firefighter and police union leaders, hospitals, universities, public works/water departments, emergency management departments, and state officials, including the Governor, Attorney General and Emergency Management Agency director.

These surveys asked for feedback in the following categories: priorities; local concerns; adequate funding; vulnerabilities; and assistance from the federal government.

The overall response rate was approximately 20 percent. While that rate does not appear particularly high on its face, Congressman Langevin's primary goal was to be as inclusive as possible and invite comments or opinions from anyone who wished to be heard on this critical subject. He sent the survey to over 250 people, predicting that a large percentage would not respond but preferring not to exclude anyone with a possible interest in the topic. As expected, many recipients (particularly city and town council members) elected to defer to an official such as the town manager or police chief to respond on their behalf.

Response rates varied by community and by sector. Of 21 police chiefs surveyed, 15 (71% responded), and 57% of communities had at least one fire official respond. Five officials from Johnston completed the survey, while several communities only sent one or two responses.

Analysis of the findings was conducted for several weeks during August and September 2003 by Congressman Langevin's staff. While the analysis and sample group is not scientific, the results are indicative of concerns and experiences throughout the Second District and provide useful anecdotal data which will assist the Congressman in identifying common problems and developing legislative priorities. Open-ended responses are used to elaborate on or clarify the statistical data, and they are paraphrased and quoted selectively throughout this report.